

[Mary Anne Meehan]

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NAME OF INFORMANT Mary Anne Meehan

ADDRESS Brookfield, Mass.

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Assignment Brookfield

Topic Mary Anne Meehan

Three neighbors had dropped in to wish Mary Anne Meehan the time of day and found her making pies. Such pies as Mary Anne can make — none better — few as good.

Each visitor received the same greeting, “Come in to th’ kitchen while I finish makin’ me pies, would you mind?” No one did mind and after the greetings were over, three interested women watched Mary Anne make mince, apple and custard pies.

“Mary Anne, you’re the best cook I ever knew,” I said, “you did the cooking at the Brookfield Inn when I lived there one summer twenty-seven years ago and I never tasted better food in all my life.”

“Oh, go on with youh with youhr oil, I’m not so hot, though there be some that is much worse, if I do say it as oughtn’t. Everybody should enjoy their food, God meant ‘em to, else why did he make so many good things grow?

“There’s nothin’ nicer than a good meal, served nice — clean table cloth an’ all. Course if you eat too much youh get fat and have indigestion. If youh feel like jest settin’ round with youhr hands folded over your tummy, a good plan is to stop eatin’ — jest stop — don’t eat a mouthful for two or three days. If youh want to know how good food can taste, go without a few meals. Some folks say th’ reason a tightwad lives longer than a man who spends his money like water, is because he eats lightly — small meals cost little and they preserve him.

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"Lots of folks make th' mistake of thinkin' th' more we eat th' stronger we get — but 'tain't so at all. Too much eatin' makes too 2 much fat an' carryin' round a lot of fat wears us all out an' then of course we don't feel like workin' an' if you don't feel like workin', it's a good idea to stop eatin' for a day or two.

"If you'll cut down on youhr meat 'n eggs 'n th' like an' eat more vegetables — cabbage, 'n greens, 'n celery, 'n carrots, 'n parsnips, an' eat heaps of fruits, apples, 'n oranges, 'n grapefruit, all of them an' drink six glasses of water every day, youh'll be so peppy you're liable to get in trouble.

"You know there's heaps of people that's dug their graves with their teeth. A dyspeptic stomach gives you a dyspeptic mind an' that's what gives folks a sour-puss.

"Did you know th' Indians used to think if youh starved yourself youh got awful wise? My grandfather used to tell about how same terrible big Indian tried it once. All th' other Indians come around him to learn but he got so weak he could only crawl round an' he could hardly speak. Then he got onto hisself an' quit it an' then he went back to eatin' an' when he got to eatin' again an' th' Indians seen him they wouldn't have nothin' to do with him.

"I got awful fat myself an' th' doc said I better reduce, (gosh, how I hate that word) Well, I tried the vegetables, practiced a week on them, I Fletcherized, that's a jaw breaker, ain't it? I did th' no breakfast plan, then th' heavy breakfast 'n no lunch plan, th' daily dozen, deep breathin', I tackled whole wheat bread — graham bread an' bran. Then I dragged my sylph-like form down to Boston an' 3 took some of them Turkish Baths. I chewed my food slow an' I breathed through my nose while my mouth was full of food, but I kept right on bein' fat.

"Funny how we never knew nothin' about vitamins or calories or dietin' when we was young. Gosh! how do youh suppose we ever got along — we must a-been tough ones to

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live through it. Now don't get me wrong. I believe in this vitamin and calory stuff all right. When they first got to be stylish and everyone was talkin' about plannin' menus and such, I says to myself, 'Mary Anne Meehan, get on to yourself. Your job is to cook and you got t' keep up to date'. So I set down and I read all them diet books and all I could find about menus and how to fix 'em so's they give youh the most strength. Let we tell youh, I wasn't goin' to be dumb about me job. I wasn't goin' to let those high hats I worked for know more about me business than I did.

"You know lots of folks look down on cooks as kind of — well, inferior ones. Tain't like the old days when youh was the hired girl and was as good as the family. Nowadays some o' these women youh work for would treat youh like the dirt if they dared. I'll never forget one woman I cooked for. She was a classy one; always trying to push herself in where she wasn't wanted. One day she had some kind o' a shindig — a tea or somethin'. She hired a girl by the day to do the servin' and I was in the kitchen a-fixin' up the stuff. Well, in the middle of the affairs I went in t' the dinin' room door jest to take a peek to see how th' food was goin. I hears me lady — the one 4 I worked for — talkin' t' the bunch of them women and she says, 'Oh, my dears, I have the most wonderful cook, absolutely a jewel. She's French, right from Paree, and doesn't speak a word of English. She's absolutely wonderful, knows all the Continental dishes and I've taught her the American ones.

"Well, sir, it wasn't so much callin' me a Frenchman that got me nerves up as it was tellin' them women she taught me to cook. I pushed open that door and I says to her — and it was in English — 'see here, I ain't no Frenchman — I'm Irish and proud o' it. And I'll have youh know you never taught me one thing, except how dumb some folks can be. God bless us, youh don't even know how to boil water'."

"Mary Anne, how did you dare?"

"Dare? And why wouldn't I, she had it comin' to her with her patronizing airs and always lookin' down her nose at me. I always says if youh know youh business well, no matter

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what kind of a business it is — long as it's honest — youh're as good as the next one. I never was one to be put upon. Sure I was a cook — been one all my life 'cept when I worked in the mill and I ain't ashamed o' it, either.”

Up to this point the conversation belonged to Mary Anne. She hadn't let it lag for a minute but now she stopped to get a fresh start and we all rushed in with questions.

“Who taught you to cook?” “How do you cook vegetables?”

“Would you be willing to give me some recipes?”

“Who taught me to cook? Now who do you think? Me mother, of course, an' could she cook. Why, she could take a ham bone th'out any 5 meat on it, a few nails, a piece of wire, a bit of leather an' some water an' salt an' it would be better than any lobster, terrapin or beef stew you ever ate. If I can cook at all it's because me mother taught me.

“Course, I'll give you any rule I know, but it's awful hard to tell how to cook some things, for lots of times I jest take a dab of this an' a dab of something else — it depends how it tastes.

“Say girls, did you ever read Dickens books — Pickwick Papers? Well, by gosh, in that book all / they do is eat an' drink. I read that Pickwick book long ago an' on every page there was something about breakfast, an' lunch 'n dinner an' I started reading th' book all over again — I got so curious about it. I wanted to see jest what they did eat.

“There was meat pie, leg-of-mutton, tongue, veal, cold ham, broiled ham, chickens, ducks, turkeys, eggs, bacon, all kinds of fish, oysters, cheese, potatoes, beans, toast, 'n lots more I don't remember.

“An' th' drinks — my — my — what drinks they had, brandy, wine, ale, beer punch, cherry brandy, (we used to call it 'cherry bounce').

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“When I was a girl we'd put cherries — a lot of 'em — in same alcohol, put in pounds of sugar, an' let 'em set ever so long 'n when we'd given party we'd have some cherry bounce. Sounds innocent enough don't it, if you forget th' alcohol. But it did stir things up an' make us more lively, I can jest tell you. Oh, then in Pickwick Papers they had hot pineapple rum an' hot elder wine rum. I tried 'em out — they're good, too. Pickwick Papers aint no Temperance lectures but I 6 guess Dickens didn't mean it to be.

“You want some recipes, don't you, dearie?” (this was to the timid soul who was a new bride and enthralled by Mary Anne's deftness with the pies) “I got lots you can have. I always say women would cook better in this country if men cared more for good food. In a big city men have their clubs an' their food is grand, but th' last thing a lad thinks about when he's courtin' a girl is if she can cook. When they're in love they don't think of food an' th' girl's are so silly they don't neither.”

“Did you ever can much, Mary Anne?” asked the timid soul.

“Did we ever can much, says you, glory be to God in th' summer we canned all th' time. Why almost th' only things me mother bought was tea an' coffee. She dried all kinds of fruits an' vegetables, better than th' canned ones they was, too. There was gallons an' gallons of preserves an' pickles an' in the cellar th' bins was full of winter vegetables, enough to feed an army. Huh, talk about th' ant. She's a piker compared to my mother.

“An' I wish you could have seen our smoke house — hams an' sides of bacon, home-cured over hickory an' corn-cob fires, I don't ever see such hams an' bacon now. And there was always barrels an' barrels of salt pork an' corned beef in th' cellar an' a barrel of flour in th' pantry.

“We made our own sugar, too, maple sugar, an' we had a spring-house, that's where we put our milk an' butter an' it was cool on th' hottest day. We didn't need no electric ice box.

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"Youh know people always laugh about the way we did things in those days. They make fun 'cause we din't have no conveniences, but I don't know. We did pretty well with what we had — lots better maybe than they'd be able to do. You never really know how you could or couldn't manage things until youh have to.

"Say that reminds me. I was always wantin' to go to Ireland to see the places where me ancestors came from. So I went — seven years ago in April. Boy, did I have a good time. Well, youh know I was always hearin' from me mother and the other women how good they cooked in Ireland. It must-a been homesickness made 'em think that. They're nice people over in Ireland; as friendly as the sun, lots more so than we are, but they don't know one, two, three about cookin' or food. They just ain't up on it."

"My, Miss Meehan youh know so much about cookin'. I wish I knew a quarter as much," the young bride sighed and looked unhappy.

"Oh, now don't be gettin' discouraged. Youh'll be cookin' like an angel before any time. I can tell by lookin' at youh, you're a born cook. There's some that is and some that ain't. I always was and I know youh are. And see here, don't be callin' me 'Miss Meehan'. I'm Mary Anne."

"Mary Anne, you've been to so many places to eat, where did you have your nicest meal. Can you remember?" Mary Anne had finished the pies and was surveying her handiwork as I asked the question.

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"Yes, I can, right off th' bat. Gussie an' my brother Henry took a ride out beyond Wales one day long ago, an' we stopped at a house that looked awful nice an' we went in to eat.

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“We had a big dish of baked beans with crispy strips of pork on top an' the best home-made bread, jest out of the oven. An' then we had a big platter of th' best fried chicken you ever ate, baked potatoes, tea an' a big pitcher of buttermilk.

“We ate out on th' porch. Th' birds were singin', th' flowers was so beautiful an' so sweet. I can't tell you why I remember it so well, only it was all awful nice.

“You ain't all goin'? I'm afraid I talked you to death, wait, I'll get those rules——”